

Review by Stella Krepp, University of Bern

“[O]nly diplomatic historians could reduce the Latin American Cold War to a Cuban beach” Greg Grandin lamented in 2007 and urged historians to counter the ‘crisis-driven narrative’ of U.S.-Latin American relations, which depicted the history of the region as a succession of wars and conflicts, yet failed to examine peaceful periods and long-term processes.¹ Since then, outstanding new studies on inter-American relations redefining the Latin American Cold War have been published, yet Venezuela has until now escaped the attention of historians.²

Aragorn Storm Miller’s *Precarious Paths to Freedom* delivers a timely response to these calls. Miller traces Venezuelan history in what he refers to as an outstanding democratic decade from 1958 to 1968. Examining the relationship between the United States and Venezuela, he argues for an “apparent case of Venezuelan exceptionalism in the otherwise gloomy story of the Cold War” (218), arguing that the presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt, Raúl Leoni, and Rafael Caldera and their *Punto Fijo* coalition were a triumph of democracy, aided and bolstered by the United States. Yet Miller also provides a detailed story of the internal upheavals of Venezuela. In rich detail, he recounts how Betancourt and later Leoni outmaneuvered the armed left in Venezuela, thwarted attempts by the Dominican President Rafael Trujillo and the Cuban leader Fidel Castro to intervene, and successfully consolidated Venezuelan democracy.

Miller’s central argument, however, is that the “Caracas-Washington axis would be the key force for moderate democratic capitalism” (34) in the region and a linchpin of U.S. Caribbean policy, particularly in regards to the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Miller offers his most compelling story when recounting the entangled history of Cuba, Venezuela, and the greater Caribbean for which the historian Stephen Rabe coined the term “Caribbean triangle.”³ Venezuela was central in condemning both the Dominican Republic and Cuba in the Organization of American States (OAS) and a strategic partner in dealing with threats to political stability in the Caribbean. Although the Eisenhower administration had originally supported Trujillo, by 1959 he had become a political liability. With his mercurial personality and constant meddling in the political affairs of his country’s neighbors, he threatened to become a destabilizing force in the Caribbean. In turn, he positioned himself in direct opposition to moderate democratic leaders in the region, particularly Venezuela’s President Rómulo Betancourt. Trujillo’s personal vendetta against Betancourt reached its climax in 1960, when it transpired that Trujillo had not only mounted a political campaign against Betancourt, but was implicated in an assassination attempt that left Betancourt severely injured. The Venezuelan government requested an investigation of the affair by the Organization of American States, which promptly condemned Trujillo for

¹ Greg Grandin, “Off the Beach: The United States, Latin America, and the Cold War,” in: Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (eds.), *A Companion to Post-45 America* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 426.

² See, for instance: Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Renata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace Nor Freedom: the Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³ Stephen Rabe, “The Caribbean Triangle: Betancourt, Castro, and Trujillo and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1958-1963,” *Diplomatic History* 20:1 (1996): 55-78.

violating inter-American rules. By August 26 of that year, the United States and all Latin American countries had severed diplomatic ties with the Dominican Republic.

Miller chronicles how Venezuela also cooperated with the United States in countering Castro and his support of armed struggle in the region. Betancourt was the central figure in rallying support for the exclusion of the Castro regime from the OAS in 1962 and in demanding further sanctions. In late 1963, after discovering an arms cache of Cuban provenance on Venezuelan ground, the Betancourt government approached the OAS again, charging that Cuba had aided and financed revolutionary groups in Venezuela. After a report that substantiated the charges that Cuba had sponsored actions to overthrow the Venezuelan government, the OAS imposed economic and political sanctions in July 1964.

One of the most fascinating accounts that Miller offers is the story of the short-lived rapprochement between Trujillo and Castro in late 1960 and early 1961 that U.S. officials stylized as a “Hitler-Stalin type of cooperation” (60). Since the Cuban relationship with the U.S. was souring, it underscored the oftentimes pragmatic politics of many Latin American governments that defied Cold War imperatives.

Despite such praise, I do have some criticism and quibbles. As mentioned in the book’s introduction, the author was unable to gain access to Venezuelan archives. He consequently bases his study on U.S. documents, and, to a lesser extent, on Dominican sources, as well as Venezuelan periodicals and a small selection of edited interviews and public statements. This is unfortunate, because the over-reliance on U.S. sources shows in the overall analysis. Despite Miller’s best intentions to reinstate Latin American agency, by not using Venezuelan sources he ultimately fails to give Venezuelans a voice. In practical terms, this means there is little in-depth discussion of what the Venezuelans wanted and how that differed from or approximated U.S. wishes. Just because superficial political interests in the Caribbean often aligned does not necessarily mean that the underlying motives also coincided.

This is perhaps most acute in Miller’s claims of Cuban and Soviet involvement in Venezuela. Yet, apart from showing that there were links, it remains unclear to what extent and in what ways Castro’s Cuba supported violent struggles in Venezuela. This is important because the question of impact and causality is crucial for establishing agency. In sum, did Cuban involvement constitute an actual threat or did the Betancourt government exaggerate the Cuban involvement for its own purposes? Miller hints at this in his introduction when he explains that “Venezuelan moderates...dexterously exploited US support” (xi) but his book ultimately cannot adequately address this point with the available evidence.

The study would also have benefitted from a broader Latin American contextualization, particularly to underline the author’s argument of Venezuelan exceptionalism. Many of the issues Venezuela faced—the radicalization of politics, the rise of the armed left, the question of development and democracy—were region-wide phenomena and a comparative perspective would have helped Miller to carve out why and how the Venezuelan path diverged. Without wanting to fall into the trap of suggesting a different book than the author has written, neighboring Colombia might have been an illuminating example as it experienced similar obstacles, but ultimately followed a distinct path.

Miller’s main theme is the “U.S.-Venezuelan effort to simultaneously consolidate democracy and modernization” (217). While he acknowledges that Washington soon privileged political stability over democracy in the rest of the hemisphere, he argues that Washington’s commitment to Venezuelan democracy

did not waver. However, I am not entirely convinced that democracy was such a crucial factor in U.S.-Venezuelan relation for several reasons.

First, Miller portrays Betancourt as a “leading visionary of Latin American societal reform and democratization” (14), but here he advances a fairly narrow interpretation of what constitutes democracy. Miller’s assessment of the *Punto Fijo* coalition as the first Venezuelan democratic government seems somewhat surprising. Skimming over the democratic *trienio* period from 1945 to 1948, in what Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough have defined as a first wave of democratization in Latin America, it is maybe not as much of a rupture as Miller would like us to believe.⁴ Even though for Venezuelans the transition towards democracy was certainly a transformative experience, it is important to note that this was a limited democracy with restricted democratic competition. And whether justified or not, Betancourt suspended the constitution, outlawed political parties and did not hesitate to use police and the armed forces to repress the radical left. Pledging democratic values and staging free elections are not the same as democratic rule, as the case of the current Venezuelan government painfully demonstrates.

Second, there has been a long-standing dispute over whether or not there was a genuine effort in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to further democracy in the region. Scholars such as Thomas Field Jr. have argued that the John F. Kennedy government and its ‘Alliance for Progress’ fueled authoritarianism and ultimately laid the foundation for military dictatorship in Bolivia.⁵ Others, such as Philip E. Muehlenbeck and Robert B. Rakove, have forwarded a more nuanced critique claiming that the Kennedy administration sought to nurture nationalist, anti-communist regimes with democratic tendencies in the Third World.⁶ Yet the key word here seems to be anti-Communist. As Stephen Rabe has convincingly argued, for Washington democracy came a distant second to anticommunism in its search for strategic partners within the hemisphere.⁷ Overall, more engagement with the literature and the new Latin American Cold War history, such as Tanya Harmer’s work, would have strengthened and helped situate Miller’s arguments.⁸

As a case in point, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ actions towards other democratic governments in the region speak a very different language. In Brazil, Alliance funds were channeled to the state governors directly, in an attempt to destabilize the Goulart government, because Washington accused him of left-leaning tendencies and being soft on Communists. Maybe more importantly, Brazilian Presidents Jânio

⁴ Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (eds.), *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944-1948* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 328.

⁵ Thomas Field Jr., *From Development to Dictatorship: Bolivia and the Alliance for Progress in the Kennedy Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁶ Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy’s Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages War Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Quadros and João Goulart adopted a more independent foreign policy, something quite unpalatable to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Ultimately, perhaps Venezuela was not more democratic than other governments in say Brazil or Chile, but Betancourt and his successors were undoubtedly more manageable than other democratic leaders in Latin America.

In a similar vein, Miller casts the Venezuelan inter-American policies against both Trujillo and Castro as a triumph of democratic values. However, Latin American support for the OAS sanctions against Trujillo and later Castro were less about the nature of their governments and more about their sponsoring of subversion and interference in neighboring countries, a violation of the sacrosanct non-intervention rule. One wonders if that was the reason for the Venezuela government as well. Ultimately, would Betancourt have moved against Castro if he had not supported the armed left in Venezuela? The answer is probably not.

Despite these drawbacks, this is rich study of a fundamentally important decade in Latin America that will help scholars to understand the complexity of Venezuelan domestic and foreign politics. With his study, Miller underscores the importance of the multilateral dimension of U.S.-Latin American relations that is often so difficult to engage with.